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ABSTRACT

This booklet identifies factors that may interfere with literacy development in young children and discusses the early intervention services that may prevent reading difficulties. It begins by emphasizing the importance of early identification of children with literacy needs. Child-, family-, and school-based factors that may indicate a child is at-risk for reading difficulties are then explained and include: (1) developmental delays associated with cognitive limitations, severe nutritional deficiency, very low birthweight, fetal alcohol syndrome, and lead poisoning; (2) chronic ear infections that may have caused temporary hearing loss; (3) early language impairment; (4) family history of reading difficulties; (5) the level of support given for literacy development; (6) the number of verbal interactions at home; (7) limited English proficiency; and (8) low-achieving schools that have low rates of student time on task, frequent classroom interruptions, very few academic tasks put before students, and too many "ditto sheets." The booklet closes with strategies for early identification of children with literacy needs and a list of recommended resources. (CR)

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PEER Literacy Resource Brief

ED 454 628

Preventing Reading Difficulties Through the Early Identification of Children with Special Literacy Needs

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the Federation for Children with Special Needs
Boston, MA

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September 2000

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Parents Engaged in Education Reform (PEER) is a national technical assistance project funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs. PEER's purpose is to support parents of children with disabilities and their organizations to be informed, active participants in education reform efforts. In addition, to enhance opportunities for early literacy in reading for at-risk students, PEER is providing information and training to parent and community organizations in promising and best practices in literacy.

The Federation for Children with Special Needs is a nonprofit organization based on the philosophy of parents helping parents. Founded in 1974 as a coalition of twelve disability and parent organizations, today the Federation is an independent advocacy organization committed to quality education and health care for all, and to protecting the rights of all children. To this end, the Federation provides information, support, and assistance to parents of children with disabilities, their organizations, their professional partners, and their communities.

For more information about the PEER Project or the Federation for Children with Special Needs, please contact the Federation's Central Office at:

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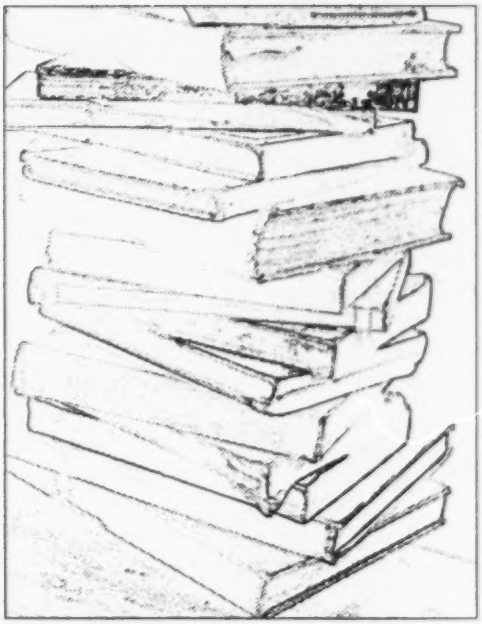
Preventing Reading Difficulties Through the Early Identification of Children with Special Literacy Needs



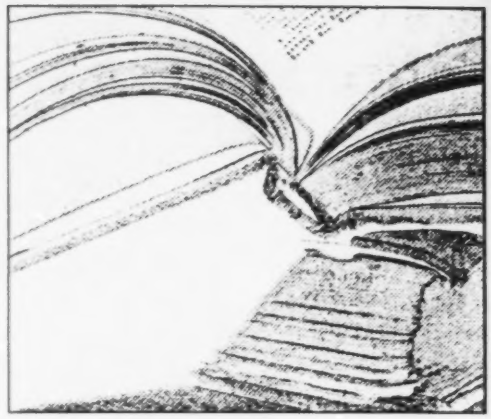
Introduction

Learning to read is a gradual process that starts long before children begin formal schooling. In fact, learning to read starts in infancy. When family members sing nursery rhymes to babies or when they read them stories, they are helping them develop as readers. Learning about the forms and functions of written language begins as young children interact with those in their lives who read and write for a variety of reasons. When young children observe family members engaged in everyday reading and writing experiences, such as reading the newspaper, writing letters, reading signs and labels, and receiving mail, they are learning to read and write.

However, some children are at risk of developing reading difficulties because of factors which hinder normal literacy development. These factors can include a child's health, sensory, or cognitive limitations, the child's family and home environment, and the child's early childhood educational opportunities. It is important to identify children at risk of developing reading difficulties as early as possible. Children who have special literacy needs should receive appropriate interventions from families and caregivers, educators, medical professionals, and community agencies.

The purpose of this PEER Resource Brief is to identify factors that may interfere with literacy development. While identifying possible reading difficulties early on is important, the purpose of early identification of risk factors is not to attach labels to children. Rather the purpose of identifying

children who are at risk is to provide special intervention, thereby preventing later reading difficulties. Information in this *Resource Brief* is based on *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children,* a synthesis of the research on early reading development, commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education and the National Academy of Sciences.[1]



Why is early identification of children with literacy needs crucial?

Most people would agree that success in reading is essential to success in today's society. A wealth of information from research supports the common-sense notion that early literacy development is important for later reading success. Therefore, identifying the special literacy needs of children as early as possible allows parents, educators, and other adults and agencies to make special efforts designed to prevent later reading difficulties.

Many factors are considered when determining which children are at risk of having reading difficulties. Some of those factors come from the child's environment: home, school, and community; others lie within the child her/himself.

Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children is a report on an extensive study of the effectiveness of interventions for young children who are at risk of having problems learning to read. The report underscores the urgency of successful identification and appropriate intervention. For example, research studies discussed in the report reveal the alarming fact that one measure of academic success, high school graduation, "can be predicted by knowing a child's reading skill at the end of grade 3."[2] In other words, a child who lacks at least a modest degree of skill in reading by the end of third grade is at high risk of failure to graduate from

1. Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998

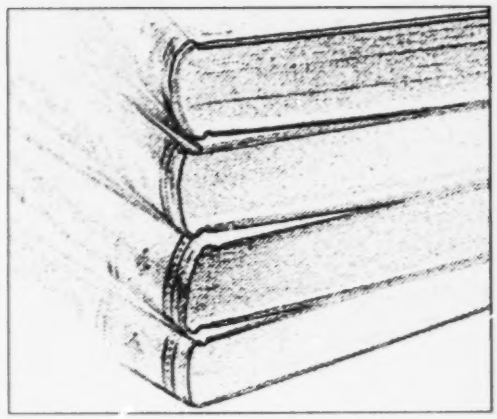
2. Snow, Burns, & Griffin, p. 21

high school. Identifying children with special literacy needs before they enter kindergarten or first grade allows more time for them to receive appropriate interventions that can help increase their reading skills by grade 3. The cure for reading failure is good first teaching, from parents, educators, and others, right from the start.

Who is likely to be identified as being at risk for reading failure?

Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children reports that a large number of school-age children spanning all social classes experience difficulties in learning to read. As a result, an increasing proportion of American students have been labeled as learning disabled. The study further points out that poor children, nonwhite children, and children whose native language is not English are more likely to fail at learning to read.

Many factors are considered when determining which children are at risk of having reading difficulties. Some of those factors come from the child's environment: home, school, and community; others lie within the child her/himself. It must be emphasized, however, that although the combined effects of several of the factors described below may lead researchers and educators to predict the possibility of reading difficulty, these factors do not mean that a child will definitely fail to learn to read.



Child-based factors

Children who show signs of cognitive and/or sensory limitations may develop general learning and reading problems. Factors associated with developmental delays, such as cognitive limitations, severe nutritional deficiency, very low birthweight, fetal alcohol syndrome, and lead poisoning often indicate that a child is at greater risk of developing reading difficulties than other children. Chronic ear infections causing temporary hearing loss during a child's early years have also been associated with difficulties in developing language-based skills, including reading.

According to the report, however, increased risk of reading difficulties is more strongly related to early language impairment.[3] The research summaries indicate that "between 40 and 75 percent of preschoolers with early language impairment develop reading difficulties later."[4] And, although children whose

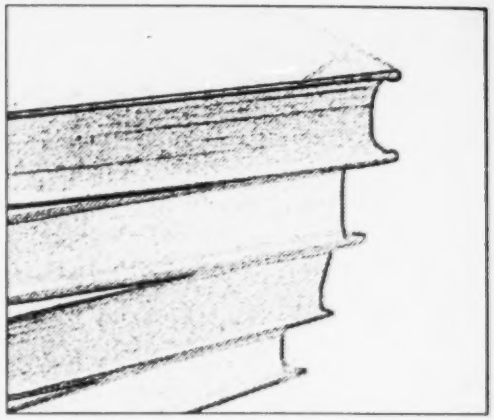
3 & 4. Snow, Burns, & Griffin, p. 105

language delays were mild or confined to speech production alone showed low risk for reading difficulties, those children still "remained at greater risk than other youngsters for the development of reading difficulty."[5]

A conclusion from the research studies discussed in the report is that, "in general, the risk for reading problems is greatest when a child's language impairment is severe in any area, broad in scope, or persistent over the preschool years."[6] Since early preschool language development appears to be a powerful predictor of later reading success, the urgency to identify specific language impairments as early as possible is apparent.

Family-based factors

The report found that children whose families exhibit certain characteristics are more likely to develop reading difficulties. This finding can be attributed either to "shared genetic or to shared environmental factors."[7] One family-based characteristic associated with reading problems is a family history of reading difficulties. The conclusion drawn from a review of a large number of studies is that children diagnosed with reading problems have a higher than normal probability of having other family members with reading problems. Although a child's later reading success cannot be predicted completely from a parent's disability, the risk is evident, and close monitoring is needed.



A more powerful predictor of reading success is the number of verbal interactions at home. Studies clearly show that the quantity of verbal interactions provided by families is important for later reading success.

The child's home environment, including the level of support given for her/his literacy development, has been shown to be related to later reading success.[8] For example, children whose home environments place little value on literacy, show little expectation for literacy achievement,

5& 6. Snow, Burns, & Griffin, p. 105

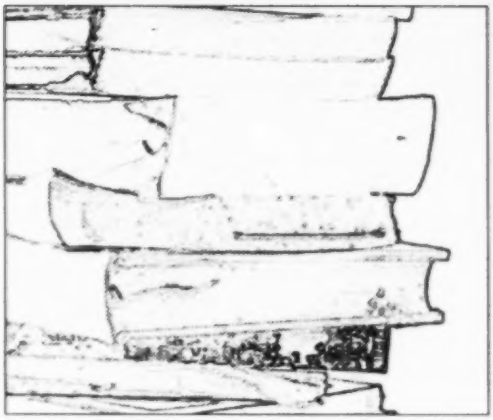
7. Snow, Burns, & Griffin, p. 119

8. Snow, Burns, & Griffin, p. 122

provide few literacy materials, and allow little or no time for adults to read to their children are more likely to develop difficulties in learning to read. In general, these children have fewer opportunities to acquire knowledge about reading.

A more powerful predictor of reading success is the number of verbal interactions at home. Studies clearly show that the quantity of verbal interactions provided by families is important for later reading success. A low quantity of verbal interactions has been related to lower child vocabulary scores, which is associated with reading outcomes. It appears that young children develop vocabulary, a necessary ingredient for reading comprehension, through the many varied verbal interactions they have within families. Identifying children who lack such opportunities for verbal interactions within their families as early as possible may allow for appropriate interventions to prevent later reading problems.

Children whose home language is not primarily English, or whose English dialect is considered nonstandard, are likely to be delayed in their learning to read. The child's limited English proficiency is usually not the sole reason for low reading achievement. This factor is often combined with other family-based factors, as well as school-based factors such as teaching reading in English rather than in the first language, and



confusions in letter-sound correspondences due to different pronunciations.

School-based factors

Children's schools play a significant role in their learning to read. If the cure for reading failure is good first teaching, children who attend low-achieving schools are more likely to have difficulty learning to read. The report summarizes research comparing high- and low-achieving schools and identifies a number of factors leading to low achievement. Some characteristics of low-achieving schools include low rates of student time on task, frequent classroom interruptions, very few academic tasks put before students, and too many "ditto sheets."[9]

How can preschool-age children with special literacy needs be identified?

The report concluded that "Children who are at risk for reading difficulties

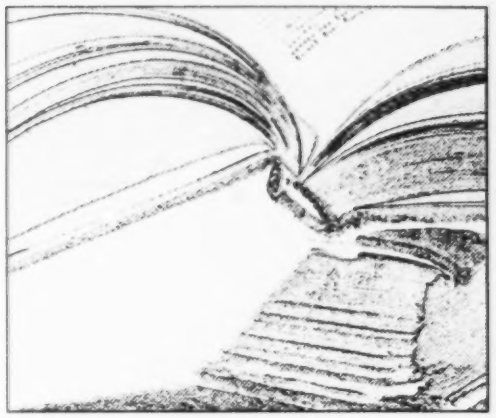
9. Snow, Burns, & Griffin, p. 129

should be identified as early as possible."[10] The authors recommended that:

> *[p]ublic authorities and education professionals should provide research-derived guidelines for parents, pediatricians, and preschool professionals so that children who have a hearing or language impairment or who lack age-appropriate skills in literacy-related cognitive processing are identified as early as possible and given intervention to support language and literacy development.*[11]

This recommendation implies the need for all adults responsible for the child's well-being to understand and use, in a regular and systematic way, multiple identification measures. Guidance about how to identify signs that children are having difficulties achieving early language and literacy skills needs to be provided to parents and other significant adults in the child's life—pediatricians, nurses, social workers; speech and language professionals; and daycare and preschool professionals.

Identifying children with special literacy needs goes beyond understanding the risk factors. Successful literacy learners exhibit identifiable accomplishments at various ages. Adults in young children's lives who are aware of these milestones can also become aware of significant delays in



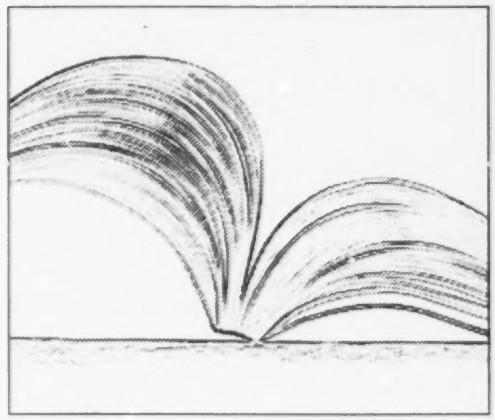
If the cure for reading failure is good first teaching, children who attend low-achieving schools are more likely to have difficulty learning to read.

achieving them and provide experiences to foster their development. For example, most children by the age of three can be expected to listen to stories, understand that books are handled in certain ways, pretend to read books, and label objects in books. By the age of four, most children know that alphabet letters can be named and that they serve a specific function and that print, rather than illustration, is read in stories. They recognize some print in their own environments and can connect information in stories to their own lives. Complete descriptions of the developmental literacy accomplishments of children at various ages should be available through preschool professionals and elementary schools.

10. Snow, Burns, & Griffin, p. 318

11. Snow, Burns, & Griffin, p. 319

It is important to keep a developmental perspective in mind and remember that children reach these milestones in various ways and at various times. As urgent as it may be to identify as soon as possible children who are at risk of later reading difficulties, caution must always prevail to prevent assigning inappropriate expectations or labels to young children.



When parents suspect that their child is at risk for reading difficulties, there are several courses of action for them to take. They may consult with their pediatrician, nurse practitioner, or other medical professional. Social workers and other agencies, such as refugee settlement organizations, may be able to provide assistance. Parents may also consult with preschool and child-care professionals, including Head Start. Many states and cities have family literacy programs, which may be found through local school districts. Each of these agencies should be able to help parents assist their children to overcome the risks of reading failure and learn to read.

Parents should also be aware of actions which will not benefit their children. For example, labeling children provides little, if any, help in overcoming reading difficulties. In fact, labeling young children may have just the opposite effect: lower expectations may be placed on children who are labeled as having "deficits" or "delays." Lower expectations generally lead to lower achievement. Children who are at risk for reading difficulties need the rich language and literacy experiences that all children need. Programs that pull them out of those experiences in order to provide "extra help" should be avoided whenever possible.

Conclusion

The need to identify children who are at risk for reading failure is clear. When children are identified early, appropriate interventions may allow them to become successful readers. Those interventions should not be seen as extra or different from the experiences all children need. Indeed, for children who have missed experiences shown to be vital to success in reading—such as being read to on a regular basis—the intervention may be as simple as providing those experiences in a timely manner. The report recommends that, "All children, especially those at risk for reading difficulties, should have access to early childhood environments that provide language and literacy growth and that address reading risk factors in an integrated rather than isolated fashion."

Resources

America Reads Challenge
www.ed.gov/americareads/index.html
The America Reads Challenge is a grassroots national campaign that challenges every American to help all our children learn to read.

Compact for Reading
The Compact for Reading
http://www.ed.gov/americareads/educators_compact.html

The Compact for Reading is a free guide on how to develop a compact, or written agreement, among families, teachers, principals, and students. The compact describes how all partners can help improve the reading skills of children from kindergarten through third grade, including those with disabilities and with limited English proficiency

ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication
www.indiana.edu/~eric_rec
ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication is dedicated to providing educational materials, services, and coursework to everyone interested in the language arts.

International Reading Association
www.reading.org
The International Reading Association promotes high levels of literacy for all by improving the quality of reading instruction through studying the reading process and teaching techniques; serving as a clearinghouse for the dissemination of reading research through conferences, journals, and other publications; and actively encouraging the lifetime reading habit.

Literacy Empowerment Fund
www.literacyempowerment.org
LEF is a Non-Profit book distribution & education organization that is distributing English and Spanish children's books to literacy groups, schools and supplemental reading programs across the United States this school year.

The Knowledge Loom: What Works in Teaching and Learning
http://knowledgeloom.org/index.shtml
Check out the Knowledge Loom's Spotlight on Early Literacy. The Knowledge Loom is a website on educational best practices maintained by the LAB at Brown University.

National Center for Family Literacy
www.famlit.org
The National Center for Family Literacy is a non-profit organization supporting family literacy services for families across the United States through programming, training, research, advocacy and dissemination.

National Council of Teachers of English
www.ncte.org
The National Council of Teachers of English is dedicated to the teaching and learning of English and the language

arts at all levels of education. Its membership is composed of elementary, middle, and high school teachers, supervisors of English programs, college and university faculty, teacher educators, local and state agency English specialists, and professionals in related fields.

National Reading Conference
www.oakland.edu/~mceneanc/nrc/nrcindex.html
The National Reading Conference is a professional organization composed of individuals who share an interest in research and dissemination of information on literacy.

National Academy Press
www.nap.edu:
The National Academy Press published the National Research Council's Report, "Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children."

North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL): Critical Issues Addressing the Literacy Needs of Early and Emergent Readers
http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/content/cntareas/reading/li100.htm

Orton Gillingham's Sensational Strategies for Teaching Beginning Readers
www.ortongillingham.com
"Sensational Strategies for Teaching Beginning Readers" is a phonics-based reading program for parents to teach beginning reading to their children at home.

Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children Executive Summary
www.ed.gov/inits/americareads/ReadDiff/read-sum.html
This Executive Summary provides an overview of "Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children," a report of the Committee on the Prevention of Reading Difficulties in Young Children, National Research Council.

Reading is Fundamental
http://www.rif.org/home.html
Reading Is Fundamental, Inc. (RIF) develops and delivers children's and family literacy programs that help prepare young children for reading and motivate school-age children to read.

State Literacy Resource Centers
www.ed.gov/Programs/bastmp/SLRC.htm for contact information. State Literacy Resource Centers assist adult education practitioners in locating and accessing the most current materials in their issue area.

Success for All
www.successforall.net
Success for All is a comprehensive and effective school-restructuring program for educating children in reading, writing, mathematics, and the social sciences.

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